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SUBJECT: China's Role in Thai Education Growing, but not
Necessarily at U.S. Expense

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11. (SBU) This is the third in a series of cables on China's
influence in Thailand.

12. (SBU) Summary. The impact of China's efforts to increase its
soft power in Thailand is evident in the field of education. The
number of Thai students in China and of Chinese students in Thailand
has increased strongly in recent years, and now outstrips the flow
between Thailand and the United States. The Chinese government
promotes Chinese language study by establishing Confucius Institutes
and supplying language teachers to schools. Thai students
increasingly view mastering Chinese as being a useful or even
necessary component of a good education. It is not clear, however,
that growing Chinese soft power in education has come at the expense
of the soft power of the United States, at least as expressed in
public attitudes towards the two countries. (End Summary.)

Fighting for Influence over Education

13. (SBU) According to the Chinese Embassy, there are currently
10,000 Chinese students studying in Thailand at 44 colleges and
universities. The vast majority attend programs conducted in the
English language. Assumption University, a private school where all
classes are in English, recorded the highest number of Chinese
students with 1,436 enrolled. China has thus become Thailand's
largest source of overseas students, according to Thai government
statistics. The Thai Office of the Civil Service Commission (OCSC)
told us that an equal number of Thais -- approximately 10,000 -- go
to China each year to study. According to the OCSC, most Thai
students go to China to study Mandarin Chinese, with the Beijing
Language Center University being the number one destination.

14. (SBU) By comparison, the Institute for International Education
(IIE) reports that in the 2008/2009 there were 8,700 Thais enrolled
in U.S. educational institutions. This number has been more or less
stagnant over the last five years, and is down from a peak of more
than 15,000 before the financial crash of 1997. Post's consular
section reports that roughly an additional 7,500 young Thais went to
the United States as part of the Summer Work Travel program in 2009.
The most recent IIE statistics estimate that 1,500 AmCits studied
in Thailand in 2008.

Institutes, Educators, and Money

15. (SBU) One of China's chief tools in promoting its culture abroad is the establishment of "Confucius Institutes." Dr. Sompop Manarungsan, professor at the Institute of Asian Studies Center, Chinese Studies Center, Chulalongkorn University told us that China had moved aggressively to establish and fund twelve such institutes in Thailand. In addition, at Mae Fah Luang University near Thailand's northernmost border, the Chinese government has donated a picturesque complex of buildings, named for the Thai King's popular daughter, Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, and dedicated to Chinese studies. (Note: While Princess Sirindhorn has helped to popularize Chinese culture in Thailand, she has also been a good friend of the United States. In 2001 she founded the U.S.-Thai Education Roundtable, which met regularly through 2005. The Thai Fulbright Commission will honor her with an award in July, 2010, for her role in promoting Thai-U.S. academic exchange. She periodically cooperates with the Embassy to hold seminars for her students at the Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy. Those students recently organized an American Studies Club whose activities are funded in part by Post's Public Affairs section. End Note.)

16. (SBU) It is difficult to pin down the number of Chinese educators now working in Thailand. Officially, the Thai Ministry of Education reported that, not counting volunteers, there were 199 Chinese teachers in Thailand in 2009, 76 working in higher education and 123 working in Confucius Institutes. Dr. Sompop, by contrast claimed that there were as many as 2,700 Chinese instructors at all levels of education throughout Thailand teaching language, history, and culture. During a December visit to Khon Kaen, Chinese Ambassador Guan Mu noted that there were more than 1,000 volunteer Chinese teachers in Thailand, but that this the number was hardly meeting the demand. (Note: Although there are many AmCit teachers present in Thailand, we suspect the number is significantly lower. There

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are also approximately 144 Peace Corps volunteers throughout the country, active in community service and teaching English courses at local high schools. End Note.)

17. (SBU) Anecdotaly, it is clear that Chinese academics in Thailand are not restricted to teaching language. In 2007/8, a Foreign Service Officer on LWOP to teach the Philosophy of History at Mahasarakham Rajabat University noted that the school's courses on U.S. History and U.S. Foreign Policy were both taught by Chinese scholars with salary support from the Chinese government.

18. (SBU) Another tool of promoting exchange is scholarship programs. Dr. Sompop told us that the Chinese government provides 100 scholarships annually through the Ministry of Education (MOE) for Thai students to learn Mandarin Chinese and culture in China for 1-2 years, and ran another scholarship program through the Thai Ministry of Health for training in acupuncture and genetic research. USG scholarship, visitor, and exchange programs, by comparison, generally bring around 150 Thais to the U.S. each year.

Comment: Is Soft Power Zero-Sum?

19. (SBU) The ultimate goal of a "charm offensive" is to influence attitudes, but it is difficult to assess how effective the Chinese effort is with the Thai public. Certainly, observers agree that more Thai students study Chinese language than in the past. But given that English study is obligatory in Thailand, studying Chinese is nearly always in addition to, not instead of, studying English. From post's extensive contact with Thai students, their main motivation seems to be a realistic recognition of China's growing importance to the Thai economy. The growing number of students traveling to China does not necessarily explain the stagnant numbers of Thais studying in the U.S. Instead, statistics indicate that the U.S. is actually losing ground among Thais to cheaper English-language study opportunities in Australia, New Zealand, and the U.K. Unfortunately we do not have polling data on general Thai attitudes toward China, but whatever improvement there may be, it does not seem to have come at the expense of the United States. As a survey in early 2009 by the Office of Opinion Research showed, 86

percent of urban Thais have a favorable view of the United States,
with only 14 percent unfavorable.

JOHN